

GERMANY'S BLUE ANGEL

Introduction

Germany introduced the Blue Angel program in 1977, making it the first country to implement a national ecolabeling program. The Blue Angel was launched by the Federal Minister of the Interior and the Ministers for Environmental Protection of the Federal States. The German government views its ecolabeling program as a “soft instrument” of environmental policy, since the program cannot establish binding requirements or bans, and because participation in the program is completely voluntary. The Blue Angel is a seal-of-approval program, and relies on information, motivation, and a commitment to the environment from both manufacturers and consumers.

The primary goals of the Blue Angel program are 1) guiding the consumer in purchasing quality products with fewer adverse environmental impacts, 2) encouraging manufacturers to “develop and supply environmentally sound products,” and 3) using the ecolabel as a “market-oriented instrument of environmental policy” (Umweltbundesamt, 1990). As the oldest ecolabeling program, the Blue Angel program has served as a model for many other ecolabeling programs in existence around the world today.

The Federal Minister for the Environment attributes the success of the Blue Angel to “the growth of environmental awareness on the part of consumers and producers” (Umweltbundesamt, 1990). In a 1988 survey of 7,500 German households, 79 percent were at least familiar with the ecolabel, and 68 percent correctly linked the ecolabel with the concept of environmental protection. Similar opinion polls have been performed on a regular basis, showing that the Blue Angel is perceived as a reliable ecolabel.

The Blue Angel program has been and continues to be popular among manufacturers and consumers. Compared to current levels, the program grew slowly at first, issuing only 500 ecolabels in 33 product categories as of 1984. By mid-1993, however, the ecolabel appeared on 3,503 different products in 75 categories. As of April 1997, 921 manufacturers (or importers) have been awarded the Blue Angel for 4,135 products in 88 product categories. Approximately 17 percent of these awards were given to non-German companies.

Recent Developments

Since the program’s inception, criteria development has become increasingly more complex. As technological innovations and ideas about environmental protection and pollution prevention have progressed, criteria have been modified in order to incorporate these changes. Whereas previously only one or two factors may have been considered when developing criteria, multiple environmental attributes (e.g., hazardous substances, emissions, pollution prevention and safety)

are now addressed. The overall process by which criteria are developed, however, has not

changed significantly since 1993 (Breier, 1997).

Pilot projects and preliminary research are currently underway to develop product criteria for numerous product groups (e.g., electrical appliances and products, products for do-it-yourself and handicrafts, household chemicals and alternatives, heating technology, consumer and industrial products). Interestingly, the pilot project for the furniture made from rattan and jute product category is being conducted in cooperation with developing countries like Bangladesh and India. Once developed, criteria for this product group will be unique in that they are for imported products.

Germany does not foresee making major revisions to the Blue Angel program to make it more innovative. Part of the success of the Blue Angel program is based on its history and tradition and manufacturers' familiarity with the program. For these reasons, major revisions to the program are not planned (Breier, 1997). Germany has recently joined the Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN), however, as a way to improve harmonization and to obtain and exchange information about other ecolabeling around the world.

Program Summary

The Blue Angel program is administered by three organizations: the Jury Umweltzeichen (Environmental Label Jury), the German Institute for Quality Assurance and Labeling (RAL), and the Federal Environmental Agency (Umweltbundesamt). The Environmental Label Jury is made up of representatives from industry, the scientific and business communities, environmental organizations, consumer organizations, trade unions, and churches. The RAL is a non-profit standards organization that acts as the administrative body for the Blue Angel program.

The process of developing and awarding the Blue Angel ecolabel has three steps. First, product categories are proposed (typically by manufacturers). From these proposals, the Federal Environmental Agency and the Jury choose suitable product categories for the Blue Angel. Each year an average of 150 product categories is proposed; typically, only six are selected as suitable product categories for the ecolabel.

Once product categories are selected, the Federal Environmental Agency drafts criteria for each product group. It takes between six months and one year to draft the basic product criteria. Criteria are typically revised every three years. If there are major technology or innovative breakthroughs in the product category, criteria may be re-assessed prior to the end of the three-year period.

Draft criteria are forwarded to RAL, which organizes "expert hearings" to address technical questions regarding the draft criteria. Representatives from industry, manufacturing, consumer and environmental organizations, and, occasionally, scientists and representatives from testing institutes, are invited to ask questions and make comments on the draft criteria. Representatives from foreign companies are also welcome to make suggestions and comments at the hearing.

Comments from the expert hearing are taken into consideration when the Federal Environmental Agency revises and the Label Jury finalizes the criteria. The results are published in press reports of the Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety. RAL published the final basic criteria.

In the last step, manufacturers submit applications to become certified to use the ecolabel on particular products. Compliance with criteria is verified by statements from the manufacturer, testing by independent facilities, and data and product information sheets. If everything is in compliance with the basic product criteria, RAL forwards the application to the Federal Environmental Agency and the federal state in which the manufacturer is located. A contract is signed for the use of the ecolabel, for a duration of four years. If during these four years, the Jury revises product criteria, then manufacturers must re-apply for the contract for those products. Applicants must pay an initial application fee of DM 300 (\$170.00 US), and an annual fee based on estimated annual sales of the labeled product. In addition, users of Blue Angel must also contribute to an advertising fund for the program. All fees are paid to RAL.

Program Methodology

Producers come forward to the Blue Angel program and make product proposals. However, unlike many other ecolabeling programs, the Blue Angel does not conduct an impact analysis when choosing product categories. Characteristics of the manufacturing process used to produce the product are of less importance for Blue Angel certification. The program's reasoning for excluding earlier stages of the product life cycle is that Germany's environmental protection laws and regulations address the reduction and avoidance of environmental damage during the production stages. Instead, when choosing product categories, the Blue Angel considers the following: transportation and distribution costs, product uses, potential for the product to be reused, maintenance costs, recyclability, final disposal, and the product's ingredients and materials restrictions.

When developing draft award criteria, the Blue Angel considers previous literature and studies relating to the product category as well as other programs' life-cycle assessments of the category. Additionally, the program may also conduct its own independent tests and studies and often obtains information from participating producers themselves about the product category. Draft criteria are based on the potential environmental damage the products may have during usage and disposal. A series of environmental and other factors is assessed. This series includes: the amount of toxic and/or hazardous substance in the product; the emissions to air, water, and soil; noise pollution; waste prevention, waste reduction and/or recycling opportunities at each stage; amount of natural resources used; the safety of the product; and, finally, the minimum requirements for the product's performance. The Blue Angel follows SETAC guidelines when developing its award criteria.

Other Information

Recently, the Blue Angel has served as a way to identify environmentally preferable products in Germany. Many public procurement guidelines in local states and municipalities suggest buying Blue Angel-certified products, or at least to consider the criteria developed for product categories when making procurement decisions.

It has been suggested that ecolabeling programs can act as a barrier to trade for imported goods, when product criteria relate to production stages. Because Germany's Blue Angel program does not include production *process*-related criteria, but instead concentrates on the final environmental impact of the product, this aspect of the program is viewed as avoiding a potential trade barrier. Many of Germany's award criteria do have minimum recycled content requirements, however, which are difficult to meet for many exporters to Germany. In this respect, many foreign countries (e.g., Brazil, who is faced with these minimum requirements for their paper packaging) see these requirements as trade barriers. Any manufacturer, domestic or foreign, may apply for the Blue Angel ecolabel as long as they meet the specified product criteria.

References

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Federal Environment Agency (Umweltbundesamt), 1990, *Twenty Arguments Against the Environment Label... [20 Argumente gegen das Umweltzeichen...und was man davon zu halten hat]*.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Case Study on Eco-Labeling Schemes*. Paris. 30 December 1997.

Product Categories (number of awarded products in parentheses)

Final Categories

Retreaded tires (4)
Returnable bottles (90)
Low waste hair sprays, deodorants, and shaving foams
Sanitary paper made from recycled paper (182)
Low-emission oil burners (84)
Low-pollutant paints (1,345)
Powder paints
Salt-free blunting spreading material (46)
Recycled paper (315)
Zinc-air batteries (16)
Potting containers and similar mould parts made from recycled material (6)
Sound-proofed glass collection bins for noise-sensitive areas (16)
Waste water-poor car-washing plants (17)
Environmentally sound pipe cleaners (14)
Reusable packing for food production (1)
Reusable packing for transportation (19)
Products made from recycled plastics (68)
Products made from waste rubber (14)
Water-saving flushing cisterns (46)
Electronically operated shower facilities (7)
Products free from insecticides for indoor pest control and prevention (24)
Wall paper and ingrain wall covering made from recycled paper (109)
Wall paper covering paper and plastic materials
Building materials made from recycled paper (5)
Halogen-free cooling and insulating liquids for electrical equipment (4)
Low-formaldehyde products from wooden materials (for indoor use) (105)
Low-emission gas burners (86)
Combination boilers and circulating water boilers for gaseous fuels (34)
Combined burner/boiler units with gas blast burner (14)
Low-noise mopeds (2)
Water-saving flow restrictors (31)
Water-saving flushing valves (4)
Soil meliorators and soil adjuvants made from compost (43)
Combined oil burner/boiler units (62)
Solar-energy products and mechanical watches (34)
Rapidly biodegradable chain lubricants for power saws (94)
Building materials predominantly made of waste glass (3)
Lithium batteries free of mercury and cadmium
Environment ticket in public transport (17)
Highly heat-insulating multi-layer window glass (15)

Low-noise construction machines (191)
 Low-noise compost choppers (32)
 Reusable ribbon cassettes and refillable toner cartridges (38)
 Photoconductor drums for laser printers (1)
 Recycled cardboard (368)
 Thermal techniques (hot air) for pest control of ligniperdous insects (7)
 Low-noise and low-soot municipal vehicles with diesel drive (18)
 Low-noise and low-soot municipal vehicles with gas drive (1)
 Building materials and gypsum made from recycled materials
 Low-emission and energy-saving gas fired condensing boilers (59)
 Low-emission and waste reducing copiers (135)
 Rapidly biodegradable lubricants and forming oils (45)
 Unbleached hot-filter paper (18)
 Low-pollutant fire extinguishers
 Lead-free seals (2)
 Cadmium-free hard-solder (7)
 Low-waste, resource-saving text marker (5)
 Component-system detergents (1)
 Independent burning gas heaters and flued-bed built-in appliances with atmospheric burners (18)
 Newspaper printing paper (consisting predominantly of recycled paper and bleached paper without chlorine (30)
 Solar collectors (17)
 Low-pollutant nail varnishes
 CFC-free and energy saving refrigerators and freezers
 Low-emission chipboard (3)
 Low-waste and low-water pollutant towels in dispensers (21)
 Computers (73)
 Rapidly biodegradable hydraulic fluids (27)
 Low-emission gas burners (14)
 Electronic ballasts for fluorescent lamps (5)
 Tooth brush with exchangeable heads (6)
 Low-noise and low-emission chain saws (5)
 Sewage plant-compatible sanitary additives (8)
 Printers
 Recyclable video and audio cassettes (1)
 Electrical appliances for hand drying (3)
 Mercury-free medical temperature sensors

Categories Under Consideration

- Household appliances (including combi-appliances)
- Rechargeable consumer batteries
- Halogen-free electric cables and wires
- Cadmium-free infrared lamps
- Television sets
- Coffee machines
- Mobile sound-reproduction sets with headphones (walkmen)
- Commercial refrigerators and freezers
- Appliances of office communications
- Gas stove and electric cookers
- Low-noise and low-emission motor-lawnmower
- Electric-equipment
- Low-solvents special coatings
- Dispersion paints in returnable containers
- Graffiti cleaners
- Construction materials made of recycled material for use in building construction
- Low-emission paint-spraying guns
- Heat-insulation materials made of renewable resources
- Biological pest control agents
- Disinfectants
- Technical devices as an alternative to sanitary additives
- Biodegradable motor oil for two stroke engines
- Electronically controlled circulating pumps
- Heat cost distributor/heat quantity meter
- Products made from jute
- Products made from rattan
- Tabular Plastic containers for non-beverage uses
- Satchels
- Flame retardants
- Easy de-inkable and dyes for printing containing less harmful substances
- Retrofitable and low-waste mug oil filters for cars

